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Renewing Christian theology with Levinas
Towards a Trinitarian *praxis*

Glenn Morrison

Is it truly possible to renew theology with the inspiration of Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy? I believe it is both a possibility and impossibility. The possibility arises when we can truly take Levinas' prophetic thinking to heart and renew theology with a language of alterity. However, it is an impossibility too because we would need an eternity, the very consummation of the Reign of God, to discover a space and time of grace wherein language and ethical transcendence are indeed one. Granted such a paradox and even aporia for theology, Levinas' ethical metaphysics resounds upon the minds of a growing number of Christian theologians. His development of metaphysics beyond the thought of Husserl, Heidegger and Rosenzweig has proved to be of special interest, especially in the domain of ethics.

But despite this resounding, there is a resistance to accept Levinas' critique of onto-theology especially from Christian theologians who wish to renew the ontological tradition of theology. The very conflict which many Christian theologians encounter indicates the great demand and challenge Levinas places to articulate and have a sense of God's transcendence otherwise than being. And ultimately it is a conflict that all Christian theologians must persevere, and through which be tested and tempted. Perhaps, this mental suffering to search for a way to speak of God might just very well lead us to an encounter with what is beyond seeing and hearing, namely the word of God in the face of the other.

At the risk of generalising, I wish to bring out just two instances of resistance, one lesser and one greater (of which there are no doubt many more, to which a whole study might very well be devoted to discern all the unique variations). Looking at the first, lesser instance of resistance, there are those who embrace Levinas' thought whilst at the same time reconceptualising divine Being, for example, in ethical or aesthetical terms. In regards to the second, greater instance of resistance, I suspect there are Christian theologians who reject Levinas' post-metaphysical thought in the continuing search for the meaning of divine Being or divine Gift; this can be exemplified by the radical desire to recover orthodox, theological ideas and premises in order to enlighten ontology, ethics, aesthetics, politics and economics[1].

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[1] Given Radical Orthodoxy's stance that sets out to remember "the roots that nurture a Christian ontology", some of its theologians may very well be against Levinas' complex ideas that lead us otherwise than being or beyond essence. For a discussion of Radical Orthodoxy, see D.S. LONG, "Radical Orthodoxy", in K.J. VANHOOZER, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 126-145.

The attempts that appeal to Levinas for inspiration, I would argue, tend to limit his thought by reading him in a way that is too dependent on the categories of objectivity, being and presence. But, given this temptation in which no theologian is immune, these attempts resound with theological imagination and an idea and hope of doing the impossible in theology. For example, with reference to Levinas' philosophy, Michael Purcell engages the theological writings of Karl Rahner, Graham Ward turns to those of Karl Barth, Michael Barnes refers to Paul Ricoeur's and to the life of Roberto de Nobili, while David Ford's frame of reference includes Eberhard Jüngel, Paul Ricoeur, St. Thérèse of Lisieux and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; and, Michele Saracino compares the thinking of Levinas and Bernard Lonergan. In short, there have been a number of attempts to enrich Christian theology, *praxis*, dialogue and spirituality from Levinasian resources[2].

In contrast, some Christian theologians may regard attempts to use a Levinasian lens to enhance theology as an interpretation of Jewish categories rather than Levinas' thought itself; and further, as a facile perception of taking Levinas' thought for granted as correct. Another major like-minded criticism is linked to the possibility that using Levinas' thought may in fact result in a calculated and even a tendentious over-simplification of Christian theology. This suggests that Christian theology is in fact allergic to a Levinasian re-conceptualisation. As a consequence, any re-conceptualisation of any Christian theologian's work using Levinas' thought is unacceptable and must, at most, be relegated to footnotes.

But despite the varying reluctance to accept the full logic of Levinas' approach, we can ask why is it that the logos, the very discourse of reason, should be confined to notions of being and presence? Clearly, it will be my argument that theology must conceive of the logos beyond being and presence. If the word 'God' is going to be pronounced, a difficult condition of alterity is demanded, which, in turn, will demand that *theoria* and *praxis* must coincide. In a Levinasian sense, alterity or otherness refers to being made responsible by the other to such a degree that it overwhelms the intentionality of consciousness. As a result, the self is obliged to sacrifice for the other to the point of expiation.

Analogy and the categories of objectivity, presence and being provide much of the language of onto-theology with the aim to make the mystery of God comprehensible. The use of analogy, despite its enriching qualities, retains the risk of thematising and limiting the divine to the realm of the human senses. In this regard, objective propositions might not necessarily be a disclosure of divine truth, but the language of totality, that is, the quest to uncover the meaning of being. For Levinas, such a quest results in an anonymous experience. It is a de-personalising presence because any attempt of subjectivity is ultimately thwarted by the ego-centrism of the self. For these reasons, the contribution aims to conceive of a *praxis*, an ethical Trinitarian existence or language of alterity in which the cries of the 'widow, orphan and stranger' might be heard. To do

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[2] See M. PURCELL, *Mystery and Method. The Other in Rahner and Levinas*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1998; G. WARD, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998; M. BARNES, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002; D. FORD, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999; M. SARACINO, *On Being Human. A conversation with Lonergan and Levinas*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 2003.

justice to Levinas' philosophy, demands that it must not read in accord with those totalising tendencies in Christian theology, namely ontology, analogy and intentionality, which we will be arguing against.

However, looking beyond the conflict over Levinas' critique of onto-theology, Christian theologians interested and inspired by the resounding nature of Levinas' thought, are, for the most part, beginning to explore its possibility. Accordingly, this contribution is a prolegomenon or an initial entry to explore and discover the richness of possibilities and impossibilities of using Levinas' thought for theology. Granted there is always the constant temptation to fall into onto-theology (of which I will no doubt at times fall), my aim here is to imagine a horizon for theology to partake of the language of alterity. Towards this end, I will set out to sketch an outline of a Trinitarian *praxis* using Levinas' philosophy in conversation with von Balthasar's theology. Hence, I will present a Christian reading and application of Levinas' philosophy to Christian theology.

Prolegomenon to a Trinitarian *praxis*

We come, then, to 'a prolegomenon to a Trinitarian *praxis*'. It is to be developed in the site of alterity, beyond the language of totality and presence. A first step will be the examination of von Balthasar's theology of the eucharist and of eschatological existence.

In von Balthasar's theology of the eucharist, we find the following:

"In the eucharistic surrender of Jesus' humanity the point is reached, where, through his flesh, the triune God has been put at man's disposal in this final readiness on God's part to be taken and incorporated into men. Applied to the Church this means that, in the end, every exercise of the ecclesial reality is a realization (in Newman's sense) of this event, which has occurred before the Church has come to be: the ecclesial cult is, in essence, a memoriale passionis Domini. This cult is a meditation in retrospect on the event which in the first place constitutes the Church, the outpouring of the bodily-spiritual reality of Jesus as the Son of the Father, his release from the confinement of his earthly individuality into the social reality of the Church, which arises only from Jesus' outpouring of self"[3].

The passage assumes that the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery, the Trinity and the social reality of the Church enter in their respective ways into the meaning of the eucharist. Jesus' outpouring of self in obedience to the Father's will expresses Christ's alterity or kenosis. The eucharistic cult signifies ethical transcendence as the realisation or continuing enactment of Christ's self-giving. Yet the problem remains: we cannot speak of such transcendence as an immanent form of knowledge in consciousness. Indeed, if we are going to give rational expression to the *memoriale passionis Domini*, then we must encounter it in the space and time of Jesus' outpouring of self. This will serve to counter any form of theological imperialism or dogmatic violence in regard to the other.

While von Balthasar relates eucharistic worship to Jesus' outpouring of self, there is also the eschatological dimension to be considered. Von Balthasar is clearly aware of

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[3] H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. I. Seeing the Form*, translated by E. LEIVA-MERIKAKIS, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1982, p. 572.

this dimension in the Church's eucharistic self-understanding.[4] The Christian *habitus*, or corporate way of life, is not only eucharistic, but also eschatological. But can these two major elements of a Christian *habitus* be approached in a way not limited to analogy and experience? Accordingly, we need to find a context to position us towards a horizon of ethical transcendence. I suggest, namely, 2 Corinthians 6,8-10, in which the ethics of prayer resounds. Let us see how this context may lead us to approach the development of

Trinitarian praxis

In 2 Corinthians 6,8-10, St. Paul writes of the paradoxes which the servant of God must face in accepting God's grace:

> "… in honour and dishonour, in all repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything".

Commenting on this passage, von Balthasar explains that the paradoxes of vv.8-10 have their root in the Cross and Resurrection. He concedes that there is no easy resolution, for they signify the breakthrough into the realm of God's glory, into that eschatological order which parallels the break with Judaism[5]. This is to say that ecclesial and eschatological existence must, in the same manner that the Trinitarian event supersedes the Old Testament partnership between God and the Jewish people, be located within the activity of God. This suggests a notion of transcendence based on being made one in Christ (Gal 3,28). However, such a notion is betrayed to thematisation, namely its comparison with the idea of "the Old Testament partnership… superseded by the Trinitarian event"[6]. In contrast to von Balthasar's distinction between Christianity and Judaism, Levinas identifies "one common destiny" evoked by a sense of alterity:

> "In the eyes of these crowds who do not take sacred history as their frame of reference, are we Jews and Christians anything but sects quarrelling over the meaning of a few obscure texts? Through two billion eyes that watch us, History itself stares us down, shredding our subjective certainties, uniting us in one common destiny, inviting us to show ourselves able to measure up to that human wave, inviting us to bring it something other that distinctions and anathema" (AT 96-97/83).

For Levinas, there is the need to go "beyond dialogue", that is, to have the "maturity and patience for insoluble problems" and to have "the idea of a possibility in which the impossible may be sleeping" (AT 102/89). This is the 'difficult condition' of alterity. To overlook the sense of ethical transcendence here is to be left with the impression that existence is reduced to some form of personal experience or 'subjective certainties'. It

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[4] See H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics. Vol. VII. Theology: The New Covenant*, translated by B. MCNEIL, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1982, p. 494-495, 507.

[5] See H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord. Vol. VII*, p. 494-495.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 495.

follows that St. Paul's words must be read as a discourse of ethical transcendence and sacrifice for another rather than an abstraction of distinctions.

In this prolegomenon, my aim is to emphasise that the encounter with Christ includes an encounter with the other in Christ. We must not consider that Christ is a system of totality or a theory, but that he is always a person. Von Balthasar speaks of a person as a work of Christian art, Ford appeals to the experience of feasting, and Barnes focuses on the experience of dialogue[7]. But Levinas' ethical transcendence calls each of these approaches into question: we must think from and for the person, not from the system of being. Here, Levinas' thought and vocabulary can be a valuable resource in revitalising Christian theology. He teaches us of the inter-personalisation of consciousness as beholden to the other[8]. He does not reject the idea of consciousness, but conceives of it beyond the Husserlian formulation of intentionality and otherwise than the Heideggerian conception of truth as the unconcealedness of being (DVI 159-160/101).

There are three factors relating to Trinitarian *praxis*: ethical transcendence, eschatology and the eucharistic life. These three factors amount to a prolegomenon to a Trinitarian *praxis*, which I will now introduce before expanding on each one.

● *Ethical transcendence*. Levinas has come to construct his unique vocabulary through developing and going beyond Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's fundamental ontology. In this regard, Levinasian idea of passivity and its modalities of fear, fission, diachrony, trauma, anarchy and persecution evoke the ideal of *praxis*. These concepts can be of fundamental importance in developing an understanding of Christian existence as Trinitarian *praxis*. Although both Ford and Barnes, for example, have ventured to use Levinas' ideas, they have set out to use them in regard to being and personal experience. In a way that differs from these contemporary theologians and von Balthasar, we will employ a more explicit language of alterity.

● *Eschatology*. The language of alterity is linked not only to the Trinitarian life of the Church, but also to its eschatological orientation. The language of alterity and eschatological discourse meet in the encounter with Christ and of the other in Christ. At this juncture, Levinas' idea of passivity and its modalities will come into play as a means to develop a prolegomenon to a Trinitarian *praxis*.

● *Eucharist*. After making the links just mentioned, I will explore the connection between Trinitarian *praxis* and the eschatological and soteriological dimensions of the eucharist, and the manner in which they interconnect in a Trinitarian *praxis*.

Ethical transcendence

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[7] See ID., *The Glory of the Lord. Vol. I*, p. 65; D. FORD, *Self and Salvation*, p. 267; M. BARNES, *Theology and Dialogue of Religions*, p. 129.
[8] Tony Kelly remarks that Levinas' idea of the human person "is not a pure, open-ended, undecided subjectivity enfolding everything into itself. It is a self constitutionally bound and beholden to the other in its disconcerting strangeness and claim". See T. KELLY, "Death and hope", in F. MORAN & T. KELLY, *Searching for the soul. Psychoanalytical and theological reflections on spiritual growth*, Strathfield, St Pauls Publications, 1999, p.166.

To stress a key point, ethical subjectivity for Levinas is made possible when the self transcends its objectifying consciousness: ethics bursts open the discourse of reason to take it beyond objectifying presence. Any discourse on God must accord with ethical transcendence[9]. Levinas' sense of transcendence appeals to the God who awakens an unheard of obligation which has affected the self since time immemorial. This ethical transcendence is overwhelming for intentional consciousness. It cannot contain the alterity in which God comes to mind.

Though Levinas speaks of moral consciousness (DL 378/194), like Heidegger he tends to avoid using the term and uses others instead. Before all common intentions, such as the experience of joy and will in self-consciousness, there is the language of passivity, of a bad conscience preceding all intentions. Levinas presents a vocabulary for such a language, namely fear, fission, trauma, diachrony, anarchy and persecution. These terms are the very modalities of passivity and the language in which ethical transcendence is articulated and the word 'God might be heard (AE 126-127/100-101; DVI 125-126/77-78). Furthermore, they are perhaps the inspiration for the logos not only to be articulated in philosophy, but also in theology.

Here we make only a brief remark on each of these terms:
● With fear, responsibility for the other's death and suffering becomes *my* fear (DVI 263/175-176).
● Fission is the occurrence of God's inward voice calling forth the self's responsibility for the other.
● Fission is also a trauma because of the overwhelming surprise in which God's inward voice has come to mind.
● The divine inward voice is related to *anarchy*. God's word is beyond representation as it comes from a past without origin.
● Such an original divine address is marked by diachrony in that the past is never present to experience and being. Accordingly, the past might be only signified by way of ethical transcendence.
● A certain persecution is entailed, as that the self might awaken to the diachrony of transcendence, as egoistic consciousness is inverted to become a moral conscience. The self is subject to a unique form of affliction when it begins to bear the faults of others.

The Levinasian terms of fear, fission, trauma, diachrony, anarchy and persecution exemplify the difficult condition of passivity towards the other. But they also identify a context in which the logos, the very discourse of reason, might be articulated otherwise than through a theoretical consciousness. Taken together, they build upon each other in ever greater complexity to signify the non-phenomenal depths of solidarity with others. But these terms also identify ethical transcendence as the place and time for God's word to be signified. We see in these terms a life that must be lived in paradox. For example,

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[9] In other words, discourse is not only a signifier, that is for example, what is seen or heard, but is also a signified, namely the giving of responsibility. Levinas wants us to understand that transcendence as signification cannot be reduced to the immanence and representations of only a signifier. Furthermore for Levinas, transcendence must interrupt its own phenomenality through the diachrony of the signified. This is the necessary ambiguity of having a sense of transcendence once transcendence has withdrawn from consciousness.

the terms speak of having a sense of transcendence once it has withdrawn from theoretical consciousness. Also, ethical subjectivity is an unheard-of obligation, that is, we are obliged to be responsible since time immemorial. Lastly, for example, there is the paradox of the Good beyond being. In other words, having a 'good' conscience is really having a 'bad' conscience, one that fears for the other. These paradoxes are of value for theology because they exemplify a language of alterity, a language that aids theology to face the problems of ambiguity and paradox in the relation between God, humanity and the world.

With the resources of Levinas' vocabulary, we turn now to von Balthasar's eschatological and eucharistic positions. Furthermore, towards keeping in mind the development of a Trinitarian *praxis* I will refer 2 Corinthians 6,8-10 ("… in honour and dishonour, in all repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.") to a site of ethical transcendence.

Eschatology and ethical transcendence

Von Balthasar singles out 2 Corinthians 5,11-6,10 for its eschatological bearing. He states, "The passage speaks… finally of the paradoxes – impossible to resolve in a tidy passage – of a radically Christian existence in the face of the Church and of the world (vv.8-10)"[10]. He then goes on to say, "This is precisely what is to be expected from the union of Cross and Resurrection in the kerygma, and it is precisely this union which fills the human vessel …"[11]. Von Balthasar cites this text to demonstrate the relationship between the ecclesial and the eschatological existence in a Christian existence aware of the 'presence' of God in the Trinitarian-christological event[12]. God is known as present and experienced as 'the human vessel' is filled with the one mystery of the Cross and Resurrection. At every stage, the correlation of objective and subjective experience is assumed. On the one hand, there is the objective experience of having heard of, studied and believed in the Cross and Resurrection. On the other, there is the subjective experience of savouring and seeing its glory. This correlation is framed by the analogy of being since the creature exists as a likeness and image of the Creator. But here von Balthasar is faced with the deepest problem of his theo-logic. He must situate his understanding of God's revelation within a Trinitarian and eschatological horizon[13].

Let us address the question of how a Levinasian perspective can be related to an ethical and eschatological existence. It goes without saying that Levinas, as a Jew, represents the tradition of Israel, which is an essential constituent of the Christian faith and theology. In agreement with Robert Gibbs, I wish to underscore the influence of both Judaism and Franz Rosenzweig on Levinas' philosophical writings: "… the most

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[10] H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord. Vol. VII*, p. 494.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Logic. Theological Logical Theory. Vol. I: The Truth of the World*, translated by A.J. WALKER, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2000, p. 9-10 and H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord. Vol. VII*, p. 495.

'Jewish' of his works are still philosophical"[14]. Indeed, Gibbs remarks that Levinas' use of Jewish sources heightened his awareness of the other in ways that caused not a philosophical reduction[15]. Looking at Levinas' philosophical discourse, there are explicit instances of an integration between the ethical and the messianic (EN86/60). Furthermore, many of his terms, such as passivity, diachrony, the immemorial, testimony and glory, provide a fertile ground to relate the ethical to eschatological existence.

Despite Gibbs' recognition of the Jewish roots of Levinas' work, there is still room for confusion in interpreting his ethical metaphysics. For example, Gibbs uses the term 'ethical experience' to describe what Levinas means when he speaks of what is prior to intentionality and consciousness. Gibbs does not use the more obvious Levinasian vocabulary of, say, 'passivity', 'exposure' or 'encounter'. Such terms, in this instance, can offer a greater clarity[16].

We press on then to von Balthasar's reflection on eschatological existence. He states that eschatological existence cannot be located in a position between God and the world, but "within the sphere of the divine activity"[17]. This point suggests the self-imposed limitations of von Balthasar's theology: by confining himself to the sphere of experience and being, there is no space given to ethical transcendence. As a result, his thought reduces eschatological existence to personal experience and to an ontological unveiling of God's revelation in Creation. But now let us bring von Balthasar's approach into contact with Levinas' ideas of passivity and its various modalities in order to remedy this situation.

I wish to argue that an eschatological sense of ethical transcendence would signify the passivity of being exposed to Christ and to the other in Christ. Let us look at this in more detail.

If the self is going to live out a Trinitarian *praxis*, then it must seek to transcend its common Christian *habitus* of experience such as feasting and savouring with the eyes of faith or even of judging with divisive viewpoints. Thus, the self should, as St. Paul indicates in 2 Cor 6,10 for example, have nothing, and yet possess everything. Let us keep this in mind in considering the Levinasian idea of passivity.

By having nothing, the self is in a condition of extreme passivity to the other's poverty and freedom. Inasmuch as the self possesses everything, the self is responsible for everything, even for the other's faults, sufferings and death. The paradox of Trinitarian *praxis* is that the more the self returns to its identity of alterity, the more the self divests itself of its personal experiences. We see then a movement from personal experience to a fear that comes to the self from the other's face. This fear is not an intention or an act, but a passivity of being exposed to the other. The passivity is so overwhelming that it causes a radicalisation of conscience, which gives birth to the discourse of reason. What, then, might this conscience without intentions signify? Beyond the emotions of being frightened and sad is the obligation to be responsible for the other's death[18].

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[14] R. GIBBS, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 155.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 155, 175.

[16] R. GIBBS, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, p. 232.

[17] H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord. Vol. VII*, p. 495.

[18] For a discussion of this finding in relation to the Eucharist, see my article, "Emmanuel Levinas and Christian Theology", in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68 (2003) 1, p. 21-22.

For Levinas, the responsibility for the other's death is in opposition to fundamental ontology in two ways. First, we have a reversal of Heidegger's idea of death as mine (*Jemeinigkeit*) into responsibility for the other's death. Second, Heidegger's idea of state-of-mind (*Befindlichkeit*) or, as Levinas names it, the phenomenology of emotion, is rejected. This is because there is more meaning to be found in the relationship with the other. In this light, we can look at eschatological existence in the site of alterity.

By facing-up to the fear for the other beyond the finitude of my death and emotions, the self, might we suggest from a theological point of view, can also face-up to Christ's responsibility of dying for humanity. The passivity involved in this 'facing' signifies that consciousness has been pushed beyond its limits. Consequently, the passivity of being faced by the other in Christ is so overwhelming that the presence of emotions, specifically, fear for one's own death, is effaced. Divested of self and possessing nothing, the self, like Christ himself, is responsible for everyone. Fear for the other now becomes the trauma of a fission. The eschatological sense of fission as the self lies in its venturing to be united to the crucified and risen Christ. In this fission, Christ's inward voice is heard as the voice of the self, bearing testimony to Christ's own eschatological existence. Let us consider this further in the light of 2 Corinthians 6,10, "… as having nothing, and yet possessing everything", when the full impact of alterity is recognised.

On the one hand, the Pauline 'having nothing' signifies that the self must divest itself of self-centred emotions and judgments before the other. The self is commanded to leave behind these experiences as they do not lead to transcendence, but to the immanence of knowledge and totality. On the other hand, God's reconciliation is everything insofar as the self lives for the other beyond its powers, finitude and emotions. This is to say that the other, and not the self's experiences, is in Christ and in the Spirit. In the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ, God's reconciliation is encountered through Otherness. Hence, the sense of possessing everything is not that of experiencing everyday senses and emotions, but that of being obsessed with responsibility for the other (the very transcendent emotion of desire for the other). Such a radical turnabout would signify being absolutely surprised, overtaken, by what has always been determined since time immemorial. Therefore, just as the Spirit had inspired in Christ a life of expiation, the Spirit, in the depths of the other also inspires the self to share in Christ's expiation. The Pauline 'having nothing yet possessing everything' paradoxically amounts to the same thing. Being free of self-interested experience ('having nothing') is an eschatological existence of otherness ('possessing everything').

We are not suggesting that the language of alterity should necessarily reject dogma. It subsumes doctrinal judgments within the life of ethical transcendence, for this has room for the ambiguity, immemoriality and the un-thematisable reality of God's Reign. Von Balthasar has remarked that, "… there can be no Christian *praxis* not guided by a *theoria* as its light and norm"[19]. There is a problem, nonetheless, when Christian *praxis* is guided by the light and norm of ontological language and experience – hence our present emphasis on a Trinitarian *praxis* looking beyond the language of totality (objectivity, being and presence).

We might further refine our analysis if we look more closely at von Balthasar's idea of eschatological existence. He states that eschatological existence stems from the

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[19] H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Logic. Vol. I*, p. 22.

Trinitarian event in which God reconciles humanity in Christ and in the Spirit. We find here that *praxis* has a Trinitarian foundation. But if we are going to understand *praxis* as ethical transcendence, then we must let the encounter of Christ and of the other in Christ be our guide. With this in mind, let us look once more at the Levinasian idea of fission. The idea speaks of the coinciding of ethics and God's logos. In this sense, the command of God's logos is pronounced by the self in ethical subjectivity. Hence, we can say that Trinitarian *praxis* is guided by a *theoria* not available to experience. Such *theoria* is not the dogma of ontology and presence, but the word of God pronounced in responsibility to Christ and to the other in Christ. How, then, might we hear the word of God?

Levinas has pointed to the other's face as the locus in which God's word is heard (DVI 127/178). Furthermore, the other's face provokes the signification and witness of God's word through the other's otherness or disturbing proximity (AE 119/94). Following this cue, we can suggest that the other's face is the non-phenomenal locus in which to encounter Christ and his *praxis* of doing the Father's will in the Spirit. In other words, we should not conceive eschatological existence aesthetically as the experience of joy and feasting nor even ethically in terms of focusing on the experience of being 'altered or made other'. On the contrary, eschatological existence speaks of the self-encountering Christ's expiation through fear, obsession and expiation for the other. Like Christ and through Christ, the self has been ordered anarchically to expiate for another. As a result, the self's consciousness is overwhelmed by the anachronism of a kenotic responsibility that is already past. In a Levinasian sense, the passion to take on the other's persecution and to bear the other's fault is the sign in which the very 'donation of the sign' is made. 'Donation' or 'giving' (*la donation*) in the Levinasian lexicon signifies what is beyond experience and explanations; that is, the self is gifted since time immemorial with the passivity of sacrificing for another. Accordingly, I want to argue that Trinitarian *praxis* is a 'gifted passivity' signified in the withdrawal of transcendence from presence.

Gifted passivity

Up to now, I have questioned the role of experience and looked to ethics to speak of eschatology and Trinitarian *praxis*. Looking at eschatology and ethical transcendence together has directed me towards the idea of Trinitarian *praxis*. Further, I have conceived of Trinitarian *praxis* as first passivity, a state in which the self transcends its consciousness to expiate for others. I employ expiation to point out the obsessive aspect of ethical transcendence which the self must reach to pronounce the word of God in responsibility to Christ and to the other in Christ. Now I wish to fine-tune the analysis of the self's passivity by speaking of 'gifted passivity'. This will help to stress the enigmatic ways in which God's word is encountered through Trinitarian *praxis*.

Let us look at the term 'gifted passivity'. I write of 'gift' in the past tense to stress the diachrony of God's word in the other's face. Diachrony refers to a past that has never been represented in consciousness. With this Levinasian idea of time, we can begin to understand 'gifted' as that which cannot be explained and identified in intentional consciousness. If we take one further step, the idea of being gifted *with passivity* identifies the diachrony of a past that cannot be represented in consciousness, a diachrony of God speaking in the self. The implication is that God's word is already gifted since

time immemorial and can only be signified in passivity. And looking at the other modalities of passivity, we can suggest that the self is not only gifted with the time of diachrony, but also with fear, fission, trauma, anarchy and persecution.

In the context of eschatology and Trinitarian *praxis*, gifted passivity can be explained as follows: when the self encounters the Father's will in the other's face, pronounces it in expiation for the other, the self signifies that it has been gifted with a share in Christ's passivity in the Spirit. At this point, the language of alterity includes 'the difficult condition' of responsibility to the point of a Christ-like passion of expiating for others. This brings me to another point to which I want to draw attention regarding the idea of gifted passivity.

Granted that the word of God is encountered in passivity and is gifted since time immemorial, there is no guarantee that the self can articulate it beyond being and experience. This is because to utter God's word through persecution and expiation is indeed a difficult condition. Nevertheless, the language of alterity informs Trinitarian *praxis* and provides an alternative language compared to the vocabulary of ontological unveiling and the transcendental qualities of being "as such"[20]. For Trinitarian *praxis* is guided by a *theoria* not available to experience. A 'gifted passivity' alone can command us to a Trinitarian *praxis*. If we reach such ethical transcendence, then we might be able to speak of the enigmatic ways in which the word of God is heard and signified in responsibility. The combined terms of 'gifted' and 'passivity', although complex, is meant to bring theology into the place and time of Trinitarian *praxis*. The implication is that God's word is not necessarily a dogma to be experienced. It is first passivity, and a gifted one at that. Hence, under the aegis of alterity, we can be led to appreciate that God's word is an enigma and a gift irreducible to presence.

It is a complex task to theologise at the limits of phenomenology. We also find this for example when Horner writes: "Not every gift (is) God, but it seems that God is only to be thought starting from the gift…"[21]. It would seem that the brackets serve to emphasise the difficulty of using the ideas of God and gift together, and furthermore the question of whether we have to think God in terms of being ('to be', hence 'is'). In even more complex language that also signifies the idea of gift beyond presence, Levinas writes: "The infinitely exterior becomes an 'inward' voice, but a voice bearing witness to the fission of the inward secrecy that makes signs to another, signs of this very giving of signs" (AE 187/147). We can begin to appreciate again, by using Levinas' idea of passivity, that the word 'God' is not an articulation of presence, but one of a radical eschatological existence or, as I have come to construct, a 'gifted passivity'. However, our account of Trinitarian *praxis* as 'gifted passivity' should not be isolated to eschatology. We must still consider how the context of the Eucharist will allow us to bring out the soteriological dimensions of Trinitarian *praxis* and its connections with eschatology.

The Eucharist and gifted passivity

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[20] H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Logic. Vol. I*, p. 15, 269.

[21] R. HORNER, *Rethinking God as Gift. Marion, Derrida, and the limits of Phenomenology*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2001, p. 247.

Employing the language of alterity in eschatology, I have set out to develop a prolegomenon to a Trinitarian *praxis*. Through applying Levinas' ideas of passivity and so forth, I have constructed the term 'gifted passivity' and suggested its place in Trinitarian *praxis*. In the state of passivity, the self is ordered to expiate for the other. The order is however a trauma overwhelming consciousness. This is because the self's passivity has been gifted since time immemorial. This sense of anarchical being-affected arises out of being gifted through Christ and in the Spirit. But it is also in the space and time of sharing in Christ's eucharistic life before the other that the self takes on its Trinitarian *praxis* of gifted passivity. How, then, is 'gifted passivity' related to the eucharistic dimension of Trinitarian *praxis*? To answer this question will mean linking soteriology with the language of alterity. To begin, let us consider von Balthasar's idea of Christ's Passion initiating an ontological shift.

At the beginning of the reflection on the dramatic dimensions of the Eucharist, von Balthasar gives an ontological perspective on incorporation into Christ's Passion: "After all we have said about the Passion of Christ being 'for us', there can be no doubt that those for whose sins Christ suffered and atoned have undergone an ontological shift. Moreover, this shift must be acknowledged to have taken place – contrary to Luther – *prior* to their embracing of the fact by an act of faith"[22]. The incorporation effects an ontological shift prior to any act of believing and knowing. In other words, Christ's Passion initiates communion prior to the act of faith. But the notion of an ontological shift implied in being incorporated into Christ's Passion would suggest an incorporation into the totality of Christ's Being. It might appear that incorporation is more an experience of divine Being. Are we then to believe that Christ's Passion initiates the presence of totality and the dramatisation of consciousness? We need to conceive of Christ's Passion not as initiating an ontological shift, but as passivity beyond being and beyond experience, that is, as 'gifted passivity'. In this way, we can discover that the Eucharist is not an ontological incorporation into Christ's Passion, but the very encounter in which we are responsible to the other with and through Christ's Passion.

Von Balthasar's ontological framework seeks to prove and explain that humanity, and the Church in particular, are incorporated into Christ's suffering and death 'for us'. The idea of incorporation identifies participating in Christ's obedience and freedom on the one hand, and grace on the other. In this regard, participating in Christ's all-embracing mission perfects human nature and all its decisions and actions. But for von Balthasar, this is a freedom that, "…comes about through our being incorporated in the Eucharist that, in the Spirit, Christ makes to the Father"[23]. In simpler terms, the Eucharist deepens the grace for the believer to participate in Christ's triune mission. Given this Trinitarian dimension of the Eucharist as that which inspires *praxis*, I want now to think in terms otherwise than von Balthasar's ontological projection of it. It might appear that the term 'incorporation' emphasises Christ's totality of being more than Christ's transcendence and person. In contrast, let us now consider the way the term 'gifted passivity' would help to clarify and deepen how the Eucharist inspires a Trinitarian *praxis*.

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[22] H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Drama, Theological Dramatic Theory. Vol. IV: The Action*, translated by G. HARRISON, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1994, p. 389.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 406.

First, let us see how the idea of 'gifted passivity' might bring out the soteriological dimension of the Eucharist. Here, we are asking how grace perfects a Trinitarian *praxis*, of having nothing, but possessing everything (2 Cor 6,10). Hence, contrary to the idea of being incorporated into the Eucharist, I want to suggest that the believer is gifted with passivity in the Eucharist. First, let us look at the idea of being gifted in the space and time of Christ's Passion. I suggest that to be gifted is not to have one's nature perfected, but to be anarchically affected by the trauma of God's order to Christ and the world to be responsible. Let us now extend such a conception to the context of the Eucharist.

In the language of alterity, we could say that the Eucharist signifies that an order of responsibility has been made through the time of Christ's death, going to the dead and Resurrection. This is a time beyond the experience of having one's nature perfected. We can say then that Eucharistic grace perfects the possibility of expiating like Christ for the other. But such grace demands a difficult condition. For, it is the Eucharist that surprises the self absolutely with the trauma of Christ's expiation. Such trauma inspires devotion to the other's hunger for the body and blood of Christ, a hunger namely for salvation, justice and mercy. Hence in the Eucharist, it is not my hunger for Christ that matters, but the other's hunger to such a point where *my* hunger is the other's hunger. We can thus begin to imagine how the Eucharist is a site of ethical transcendence in which the self is gifted with the Trinity's eternal salvific plan.

According to von Balthasar, Christ's Passion gives rise to an ontological shift that must be acknowledged before the act of faith and points to St. Paul for proof (Rom 5,8,10; 14,8 and 2 Cor 5,14-15)[24]. The idea of an ontological shift thematises the experience of Christ's goodness as an essence in consciousness. In contrast to this, we would argue that Christ's Passion evokes a sense of 'gifted passivity' so that St. Paul's writings are not proof of any ontological shift, but rather articulate theology and alterity together. Before describing the paradoxes of eschatological existence, St. Paul writes: "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (2 Cor 5,14-15). It is significant St. Paul emphasises that the love of Christ urges the faithful not to live for themselves, but for Christ. If we take this soteriological dimension of eucharistic living to be first ethical rather than ontological, we can see that it deepens and clarifies not the perfection of *my* nature, but the perfection of *my* expiation for others. The self is therefore first a passivity to the other's hunger. Further, we can conceive that the Eucharist ruptures the experience of one's nature as perfect. Or, in other words, just as Christ cannot deny humanity with responsibility, so the Eucharist deepens and clarifies the self's responsibility beyond essence. Hence, the Eucharistic self exists through and for the other to a point where such passivity coincides with expiation.

Expiation is a difficult condition, but I want to argue that it is a condition *par excellence* that gives rise to theology. This is to say that the salvific encounter of Christ's suffering, death and rising to new life cannot be reduced to an essence in consciousness, but rather it can be discovered in eschatological existence. Accordingly, if we are going to grasp the soteriological dimensions of the Eucharist, the grasping must also be a passivity coinciding with expiation. The first concern of liturgy is not an aesthetic

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 389-390.

feasting of the senses or a dramatisation of Christ's Passion in consciousness, but a passion of taking on humiliation, persecution and trauma for another. If we take this to be true, then any soteriological conception of the Eucharist must also be one that meets the demands of eschatological existence. For example, when St. Paul states that, "as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Cor 6,10), we could well imagine that not living for oneself may end up in a life of poverty. But for St. Paul this is everything; for when we live for Christ, we are rich. It is my conviction that the theologian is called to this very vocation. Hence, when theology rises above experience and essence, it might just cut through objectivity and articulate the word 'God' in the space and time of ethical subjectivity.

Conclusion

To this point, I have set out to argue that the Eucharist is not an ontological incorporation, but a trauma cutting across the unity of transcendental apperception and transcending the totality of being. It gives rise to what I have called a 'gifted passivity' or, in theological terms, a Trinitarian *praxis*. It is my argument that Trinitarian *praxis* starts from and for the other in Christ, that is, by way of ethics without ontology. For the inspiration of this idea, I have drawn particularly from Levinas' ideas of passivity, the immemoriality of consciousness and of otherness.

For Levinas, consciousness is not only experience, but is also a moral conscience beholden to the other. This conception of consciousness signifies that the other is not subject to experience, theory and cognition. Hence, the other should not be identified as a work of art or even reduced to an object of feasting or of dialogue. The other is beyond the event of being. Once we understand that we cannot reduce the other to the mastery of our own projects in life, then we can begin to articulate otherwise than experience and essence. However, Levinas, for the most part, holds that only philosophy, in the sense of being "the wisdom of love at the service of love", is called to take this role (AE 207/162). In contrast, I have set out to argue that theology is called upon to do the same, especially when conceived in the site of Trinitarian *praxis*.

I have stressed Trinitarian *praxis* in regards to ethical transcendence, eschatology and soteriology. By doing so, I have begun to renew Christian theology not necessarily with another theory of totality, but with the idea of theology coinciding with the space and time of Christ's Passion and of the other in Christ. Accordingly, I began looking at Trinitarian *praxis* through connecting eschatological existence with ethical transcendence. I found that the non-phenomenality of the other's face gave rise to encountering Christ and his *praxis* of doing the Father's will in the Spirit. Furthermore, I argued that the encounter was an extreme passivity in which consciousness is overwhelmed by ethics. We were therefore in a position to understand that eschatological existence is first a discourse of ethics, a discourse without origin and a discourse coming from an immemorial past of the Trinity's eternal salvific plan. I described such eschatological discourse with the term 'gifted passivity'. If we break this term up, 'passivity' refers to the overwhelming trauma of responsibility and 'gifted' to being immemorially united with the Father's obedience through Christ and in the Spirit.

Following the conception of 'gifted passivity' in the context of describing the eschatological dimension of Trinitarian *praxis*, I looked at it in regards to the Eucharist.

My purpose was to bring out both the eschatological and soteriological dimensions of the Eucharist and how their interrelation might give light to a Trinitarian *praxis*. On the one hand I argued that the dimension of Christ's Passion in the Eucharist deepens and clarifies the self's eschatological existence. On the other hand, I argued that any soteriological conception of the Eucharist must also be one that meets the demands of eschatological existence. In other words, passivity to the other in Christ is the ground, which guides a salvific understanding of the Eucharist. If we look at these two arguments as a whole, we have an understanding of Trinitarian *praxis*, namely that the Eucharist is the place and time of eschatological existence (2 Cor 6,10) and of being urged on the by the love of Christ (2 Cor 5,14).

As von Balthasar suggests, the love of Christ that urges us on is indeed prior to the act of faith. But, I have found that it is also prior to any ontological shift, that is, reducing Christ's Passion to an essence, an *a priori* presence or even an experience of goodness. It follows that the love of Christ in the Eucharist urges us on before the other in Christ and since the time of the Trinity's salvific plan (Rom 8,3). This is to say that the Passion of Christ urges us to hear the logos of God on the other's face and to articulate it with the reason and passion of expiation. If we take this to be true, we can discover that Trinitarian *praxis* is an optics for theology, to conceive of Christ and of the other in Christ beyond analogy and experience. Accordingly, with the term 'gifted passivity', I have tried to bring out how ethical transcendence might provide the possibility for *theoria* and *praxis* to coincide.

In the course of the contribution, I have attempted to enrich von Balthasar's theology with ideas resounding from Levinas' thought. Furthermore, I have set out to articulate a 'prolegomenon to a Trinitarian *praxis*'. The complexity of Levinas' thought for Christian theology serves to teach of the priority of responsibility for the other. In particular, I have found the Levinasian ideas of otherness and of passivity most helpful for inspiring theological insight. Consequently, I have argued that God is neither an essence nor an experience. Rather, it is a difficult condition in which to encounter God's word, one that demands a liturgy of responsibility to the point of expiating for others. Accordingly, we should not, as von Balthasar's trilogy exemplifies, focus on Christ as an object of analogical thought, but rather understand Christ as a person of ethical subjectivity. Theology and Trinitarian *praxis* belong together. Perhaps then, when theology is both a discourse and a signification of the divine logos, we might praise God's wonderful works in the place and time of offering sacrifice.

Trinitarian *praxis* is an ethical event with eschatological and soteriological horizons. My conception of Trinitarian *praxis* owes much to Levinas' sense of holiness and his ideas of otherness and passivity. Yet, it has gone beyond his original context. Throughout the contribution, my aim has been to use Levinas' ideas as inspiration to enrich von Balthasar's theology and to develop my own. Levinas' thought has much to offer. Given its complexity, it will perhaps always be an arduous task to utilise it for the benefit of Christian theology. But I argue that persevering with such complexity can result in an important contribution. This has been the major aim of the contribution. Beyond the language of ontology, analogy and presence, I have tried to argue that it is possible to theologise.

I have argued that Levinas' thought is the very inspiration to conceive of a language of alterity for Christian theology in which we might come to a sense of

Trinitarian *praxis*. With such a sense, the way is open to enter into a 'maturity and patience' for insoluble problems. This is the eschatological path to go 'beyond dialogue' and to seek a union between scholarship and *praxis*[25]. Jewish-Christian relations could well be a context and a starting point for the Christian scholar to live out a Trinitarian *praxis*. Indeed, if the world's redemption, stirring as mercy, kenotic love and friendship, is witnessed first in the reconciliation between Jews and Christians, this, then, could be the testimony that everything is possible[26].

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[25] This finding is explored in the context of Jewish-Christian relations and the "Eschatological Vocation of a Scholar" in my article, "Jewish-Christian Relations and the Ethical Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas: 'At the very moment where all is lost, everything is possible'", in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38 (2001) 2-3, p. 318-319.

[26] See my article, "Jewish-Christian Relations", p. 328.